

The Life of The Prophet Muhammad

'ABD AL-RAḤMĀN 'AZZĀM



The Islamic Foundation

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Foreword to the New Impression

We feel great pleasure in bringing out a new edition of this pamphlet in view of the continuing demand for short essays on various aspects of Islam. This pamphlet was originally published four years ago by the Islamic Council of Europe, being taken from a book of readings on Islam — *Islam: Its Meaning and Message,* edited by Brother Khurshid Ahmad, now Chairman of the Islamic Foundation. Its convenient size made it a specially useful addition to the growing literature on Islam, providing the busy modern reader with a succinct treatment on one particular aspect of Islam in the lucid and convincing style of an eminent author.

As the first edition ran out, and as we continued to receive enquiries and requests from various quarters, we decided to publish a second edition. Recent developments on the world stage have underlined the crucial importance of Islam in strategically vital areas. We need hardly stress the genuine need for fuller information: what matters more is that the information supplied should be both accurate and objective, presenting Islam as it really is. Nothing less can create mutual respect and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as renewing the Muslims' own self-awareness. We believe these and similar pamphlets contribute greatly in this direction.

We pray to Allah to bless our efforts with His mercy and acceptance.

The Islamic Foundation
Leicester
18 October 1979
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KHURRAM JAH MURAD
Director General

*The Life of the Prophet Muhammad**

'Abd-al-Raḥmān 'Azzām

Lo! My worship and my prayers and my life and my death are for Allah, Lord of the worlds. He hath no partner. This I am commanded, and I am the first of the Muslims (those who surrender (unto Him)). (al-Qur'ān, 6: 163-164).

THE Muslims form a nation over thirteen centuries old, and comprise at present more than six hundred million human beings in all parts of the world. The Prophet Muhammad was the first citizen of this nation, its teacher and its guide. He lived and died in the full memory of history. The evolution of his personality, religion, and nation assumed the force of a human drama of the greatest magnitude, witnessed not only by his contemporaries but also by the rest of the world in subsequent times.

The hero of this drama did not die until his Message was delivered and a Muslim nation established in the Arabian peninsula. Says Bernard Lewis, 'In an essay on Muḥammad and the origin of Islam Ernest Renan remarks that, unlike other religions which were cradled in mystery, Islam was born in the full light of history. "Its roots are at surface level, the life of its founder is as well known to us as those of the Reformers of the sixteenth century" '[1]

* This chapter is reproduced from Abd-al-Rahman Azzam's book *The Eternal Message of Muhammad,* London: The New English Library, 1964. Translated from Arabic by Caesar E. Farah.

1. Bernard Lewis, *'The Arabs in History'* (2nd ed., reprinted; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 36.

During the half-century following the death of the Prophet (in A.D. 632), his Message was carried forth by five of his Companions,[2] who adhered closely to the precedents which he had established for ruling his nation. Four of them[3] were intimate, reliable friends and students who had followed him from the earliest days of his call, through persecution and ultimate triumph. The fifth Caliph[4] was Mu'āwiyah, son of Abū-Sufyān, the formidable leader of the opposition to Muḥammad. Mu'āwiyah's career as Caliph was longer than that of his predecessors. He presided over the affairs of the Islamic community for forty years as governor of Syria, then caliph.

Yet in spite of the wealth of historical facts available to us, perhaps no prophet and religion are so little known or understood by the Western world as Muḥammad and Islam. The West, which has maintained now for several centuries a tradition of freedom of thought, a high grade of literacy, and boundless knowledge in all spheres of human learning, knows far less about Muḥammad — both as a prophet and as a leader of men who exercised a direct influence on the course of human events — than about Alexander or Caesar, whose influences have been less than those of Muḥammad and Islam.[5]

What is the cause of such indifference in a world so eager to learn and to understand? Two explanations merit consideration. The first is from the pen of a distinguished Swedish scholar, who writes:

The cause . . . may perhaps be best expressed by the proverb: Relatives understand each other least of all. A Christian sees much in Islam which reminds him of his own religion, but he sees it in an extremely distorted form. He finds ideas and statements of belief clearly related to those of his own religion, but which, nevertheless, turn off into strangely different paths. Islam is so familiar to us that we pass it by

2. The principal Companions of the Prophet, called the *Sahābah* (singular: *Sāhib*) might be compared to the apostles and disciples of Jesus.

3. Abū-Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and 'Alī — the 'Orthodox Caliphs' (A.D. 632-661). In the Arabic, the word orthodox in this phrase actually means mature, well-guided, correct; the usage in this book follows that of Western scholars, who have long written of the 'Orthodox Caliphs'. The reason these four Caliphs are considered thus by Muslims is that, having known the Prophet personally and lived so closely according to his principles, they are looked to as great authorities and their decisions are considered precedents.

4. From the Arabic *Khalīfah,* successor.

5. Indeed, it would seem that a conspiracy of silence has replaced the old enmity in the West concerning the Message, which is diametrically opposed to so many injustices perpetrated in the name of God and an enlightened progress.

with the careless indifference with which we ignore that which we know and know only too well. And yet it is not familiar enough to us to enable us really to understand its uniqueness, and the spirit by which it has won its own place in the sphere of religion, a place which is still rightly occupies by virtue of its very existence. We find it much easier to understand religions that are completely new and strange to us — as, for example, the religions of India and China. A greater degree of insight and of spiritual freedom is required of him who would understand the Arabian Prophet and his book.[6]

A second explanation is presented by another scholar:

History has been such that the West's relations with the Islamic world have from the first been radically different from those with any other civilization . . . Europe has known Islam thirteen centuries, mostly as an enemy and a threat. It is no wonder that Muḥammad more than any other of the world's religious leaders has had a 'poor press' in the West, and that Islam is the least appreciated there of any of the world's other faiths. Until Karl Marx and the rise of communism, the Prophet had organised and launched the only serious challenge to Western civilization that it has faced in the whole course of its history . . . The attack was direct, both military and ideological. And it was very powerful.[7]

The Prophet was born in Makka. The exact date of his birth is disputed, but it is agreed to be around A.D. 570. This uncertainty is usual in Arabia, 'the country of illiterate people,' as the Qur'ān called it. Even today it is difficult to establish the exact birthdates of other famous men; for instance, it is hard to date the birth of the famous 'Abd-al-'Azīz ibn-Su'ūd (or ibn-Sa'ūd), the conqueror and unifier of Arabia, a man who ruled for more than fifty years (he died in 1953), and whose personality, conduct and biography are known in great detail.

The undisputed source for Muḥammad's life is the Qur'ān; there are also many *siyar* (singular: *sīrah*) or biographical studies of the Prophet, written from the accounts of those who knew him personally or to whom his memory was quite vivid.

6. Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith,* tr. Theophil Menzel (London: George Allen Unwin Ltd., 1936), p. 11 (reprinted: New York: Barnes and Noble, 1957). It will surprise Western readers to learn that the Muslim world always has been far more familiar with Christianity and Judaism than the West with Islam. Muslims have always regarded Christian and Judaic tenets and beliefs with the greatest respect and interest.

7. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (New York: The New American Library, 1957), p. 109.

Both his parents died young, his father, 'Abd-Allāh, first and his mother, Āminah, shortly after. It is said that he was about six years of age at the time of his mother's death. His grandfather 'Abd-al-Muttalib, a prominent leader in Makka, then took charge of him. It is related that 'Abd-al-Muttalib loved the boy dearly and often kept him close beside him, even in meetings where important affairs were discussed, usually in the shade of the Ka'bah.[8] When his uncles would try to remove the child, the grandfather would prevent them, saying, 'Let him be; my child will be leader of his people.'

Upon the death of his grandfather, Muhammad's guardianship passed to his uncle Abū-Tālib, a no less devoted patron, whose love for and protection of Muhammad persisted long after the Prophet proclaimed his mission and the new faith. Even though Abū-Tālib was never converted to the new religion, he continued to show love and protection for his nephew, despite extreme hardships and dangers, until his death, when Muhammad was fifty years old.

Makka was the traditional centre of Arabia in both religion and trade; it was the crossroad of commercial transit between east and west, north and south. Abū-Tālib's clan, the Banū 'Abd Manāf, the most influential in all Arabia, was a part of the great Quraysh tribe,[9] and formed an important element in the oligarchy that ruled Makka and its surrounding tribes. The Prophet's youth was that of the normal young Qurayshī — he fought the battles, joined the peace negotiations, and shared in the duties and rights of his society[10] — except

8. The Ka'bah is a simple cube-like structure towards which Muslims all over the world face in their prayers. It is the first place of worship man had built on the earth. The present building was erected by the Prophets Abraham and Ishmael.

9. Muhammad's immediate family on his father's side were the Banū-Hāshim or Hāshimites, so named for Muhammad's great-grandfather Hāshim. (Banū means son of, and is the plural of ibn.) One of Hāshim's brothers, al-Muttalib, gave his name to the Banū-Muttalibites, and the son, Umayyah, of another founded the Umayyads. These three families, which will figure prominently in this chapter, were in turn subgroups within the Quraysh of the clan Banū-'Abd-Manāf. To clarify relationships further, note that 'Abd-al-Muttalib was the son of Hāshim (and hence a Hashimite, not a Muttalibite) and the father of Abū-Tālib and of Muhammad's father, 'Abd-Allāh.

10. Of these obligations, one remained extremely dear to him, even after his prophetic call, when he severed all his ties with his tribe. This was his membership in the league called *Hilf al-Fudūl*, which originated to protect the defenceless and guarantee the safety of strangers in Makka. The league came about because a stranger from the Yemen sold goods in Makka to an influen-

that he manifested from early years a revulsion to the worship of idols. Once when he was besought to act in the name of the gods al-Lāt and al-Uzzā, he replied with the startling answer, 'Do not ask me anything for the sake of these idols. I have never hated anything more.'

But such strong expressions of disbelief in the gods or idols of his tribe did not alienate his kinsmen and friends from him or close him out from their friendly society, for he was loved by all for his noble character and great kindness and honesty. It was only at the age of forty, when his duty to the one God compelled him to preach against idol worship, that his people began to persecute him.

Muhammad, like the rest of the young men in Abū-Tālib's family, had to work and help preserve the dignity of a generation of Hāshimites who, though they were less prosperous than their predecessors, still remained proud and powerful. He acted as a shepherd, and later, while participating in business, his relations with his people gained him the name of al-Amīn (trustworthy).

At the age of twenty-five, he married a lady of forty, his first wife, Khadījah, a relative and a rich widow. They lived twenty-five years together in prosperity and happiness, and had four daughters and two sons, but of the daughters who lived and married, only Fātimah had descendants.[11] Muhammad was a devoted, loving father, and was kind to children in general. In his twenty-five years of life with Khadījah, he was the ideal husband. When she died, he remained several years without a wife, and even after he married — for a number of reasons — several wives, he always remembered Khadījah. 'When I was poor, she enriched me; when they called me a liar, she alone remained true.' It is an undisputed fact that Khadījah was the first to believe in Muhammad's mission.

11. Fātimah was the mother of Hasan and Husain. Her husband 'Alī was a cousin and the fourth Caliph.

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tial member of a powerful local clan who subsequently refused either to pay the price or to return the goods, whereupon the aggrieved seller stood up in the vicinity of the Ka'bah and implored aid for himself as a stranger in the city. Several members of the Quraysh aristocracy rallied to his assistance and secured the return of his goods. Meeting next in the house of 'Abd-Allāh ibn-Jud'ān, they pledged henceforth to combat oppressive acts and uphold justice. Muhammad, then only twenty-five years old, was present at this gathering, and was so impressed with the merits of the pledge that when he commenced his mission, he legalised it in Islam. As the years went by, even after his mission had become a success, the Prophet continued to express both his high regard for the league and his willingness to abide by its provisions.

When he received his first revelation while on a retreat in the countryside, he returned home frightened and shivering. Khadījah received him with the comforting words, 'No, you have nothing to fear. God will never let you down; you are kind to your relatives, you are astute and patient, you give to the needy, you are generous to guests, and you never fail to relieve people from distress.'[12]

So was Muḥammad described by the one who knew him best before the call and the prophetic revelation. Let us now follow his role in the great drama that was destined to transform his land, his people and the world.

Muḥammad, at the age of forty, was inclined to worship in solitude in a cave on Mount Hirā outside the city. It was while praying, during the sacred month of his people, that he heard a voice command him, 'Read.' 'I cannot read,' he replied. But the voice again commanded him, 'Read: in the name of the Lord Who creates . . . man from a clot. Read: And your Lord is the Most Bounteous. Who teaches (writing) by the pen, teaches man that which he knew not.'[13]

Trembling, Muḥammad rushed home to Khadījah and told her of his experience. She comforted him and encouraged him. After a short interlude, he again heard the voice calling to him: 'You are the messenger of God, and I am Gabriel.' Rushing back to Khadījah in a state of complete exhaustion, he asked that she cover him with a cloak. Then he heard the call: 'O you enveloped in your cloak, arise and warn! your Lord magnify, your raiment purify, pollution shun! And show not favour, seeking worldly gain! For the sake of the Lord, be patient!'[14]

It was then Muḥammad realised what his mission to his people was to be, and that was how it began. It is this mission which forms the subject of this book — this mission which conquered the hearts of men, and continues to do so with soaring vitality over thirteen centuries later.

Muḥammad's sincerity was never doubted by those who knew him well — his wife, his attendant-secretary, and his young cousin 'Alī who lived with him; these were his first converts. And though to his grief he could not convert his uncle Abū-Ṭālib, the old man never ceased to show faith in the sincerity of his nephew: when 'Alī, his son, converted, he told him, 'Go, my son: he will never call you but to what is good.'

12. A. R. 'Azzām, *Baṭal al-Abṭāl Muhammad* (2nd ed. Cairo: The House of Arabic Books, 1954), p. 16.

13. al-Qur'ān, 96: 1-5.

14. Ibid., 74: 1-7.

Was Muḥammad's inspiration genuine? Did he speak in entirely good faith? The Muslims, of course, had no doubt; but this was also the attitude of knowledgeable men and serious scholars. Such men were and still are convinced of Muḥammad's earnestness, faithfulness and sincerity.

Some thirty years ago, I asked Sir Denison Ross, then dean of the London School of Oriental Studies, if he believed that Muḥammad had been sincere and faithful. He answered, 'I am sure of that; he never lied or deceived; he was sincere and truthful.' I asked further, 'Do you believe that he was the Prophet of God?' To this he replied, 'That is another matter.' Modern scholars no longer question his truthfulness. According to Tor Andrae:

> Formerly, men thought that his character revealed a certain premeditation, a calculating cleverness . . . That Muḥammad acted in good faith can hardly be disputed by anyone who knows the psychology of inspiration. That the message which he proclaimed did not come from himself nor from his own ideas and opinion, is not only a tenet of his faith, but also an experience whose reality he never questioned. Possibly he was in doubt at first as to the identity of the hidden voice — as to whether it really came from the heavenly messenger whom he had seen in the mountains of Mecca or from an ordinary jinni . . .[15]

Muḥammad quietly preached his faith in One God for some time. He won a few converts: his best friend, Abū-Bakr, a wise, respected and rich merchant; later 'Uthmān and Ṭalḥah, equally important and well-to-do Makkan Qurayshīs; and a number of poor citizens and slaves. Then he received the command to preach in public: 'Thus We send you (O Muḥammad) to a nation, before whom other nations have passed away, that you may recite to them that which We have inspired in you . . . Thus have We revealed it, a decisive utterance (Qur'ān) in Arabic . . .'[16]

With this command from God, the Prophet went forward to warn his people against idol worship and to tell them to expect a resurrection and a day of judgement.

He stood for the first time on the Hill of Ṣafā opposite the Ka'bah, where the Makkan idols were glorified, and said to the people: 'Supposing I now told you that just behind the slopes of this hill there was

15. Andrae, *op. cit.,* p. 47.
16. al-Qur'ān, 13: 30, 37.

an enemy cavalry force charging on you. Would you believe?'

'We never knew that you lied,' they replied.

Then he said, 'I warn you I have a Message from God, and I have come to you as a warner and as the forerunner of a dreadful punishment. I cannot protect you in this world, nor can I promise you anything in the next life, unless you declare that there is no God but the one God.'[17]

They mocked him and went away. Thus began his ten-year career of active struggle and persecution in Makka. He did not desist from preaching to his people of a punishment that would come upon the unbelieving city. He told them, in the fiery language of the early *Sūrahs,*[18] how God had punished the old tribes of the Arabs who would not believe in His messengers — how the flood had swallowed up the people who would not harken to Noah.

He swore unto them — by the wonderful sights of nature, by the noonday brightness, by the night when it spreads its view, by the day when it appears in glory — that a like destruction would assuredly come upon them if they did not turn away from their idols and serve God alone. He fired his Message with every resource of language and metaphor until it seared the ears of his people. And then he told them of the last day when a just reckoning would be made of the deeds they had done, and he spoke of Paradise and Hell with all the glow of Eastern imagery. The people were moved and terrified; conversions increased.

It was time for the Qurayshis to take action. If the idols were destroyed, what would become of them, the keepers of the idols, and their renown throughout the land? How would they retain the allegiance of the neighbouring tribes who came to worship their several divinities at the Ka'bah? That a few should follow the ravings of a mad man or magician who preferred one God above the beautiful deities of Makka was of small concern; but that some leading men of the city should join the sect, and that the magician should terrify the people in broad daylight with his denunciation of the worship which they superintended, was intolerable.

The chiefs were seriously alarmed, and resolved on a more active policy. Hitherto they had merely ridiculed the preacher of this new faith; now they would take stronger measures. Muhammad they dared not touch directly, for he belonged to a noble family which, though

17. 'Azzām, *op. cit.,* p. 16.

18. *Sūrah* means chapter of the Qur'ān.

reduced and impoverished, deserved well of the city and which, moreover, was now headed by a man who was revered throughout Makka and was none other than the adoptive father and protector of Muhammad himself. Nor was it safe to attack the other chief men among the Muslims, for blood revenge was no light risk.[19] They were thus compelled to content themselves with the invidious satisfaction of torturing the black slaves who had joined the 'obnoxious faction'.

The struggle grew in intensity. The Makkan oligarchy was seriously disturbed. Muḥammad was in earnest: he was the Messenger of God, and was under His orders. The idols of Makka were not gods or partners with the Almighty; they were helpless and useless, and there was no god but Allah. This purest form of monotheism, which is the essence of Muhammad's faith, was an impossible doctrine for the Qurayshīs to accept. The polytheism of Makka had been established from time immemorial. It was not only the religion of their ancestors but the source of their distinction in all Arabia. If it went, with it would go their honour, power and wealth. Muḥammad was the descendant of 'Abd-Manāf, Hāshim, and 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, who, generation after generation, had been the leading men of the Quraysh and had had its interest at heart; so why not try to settle with him, on whatever might satisfy his dream of power and ambition?

A prominent leader of the Makkan oligarchy, 'Utbah ibn-Rabī'ah, was authorized to negotiate with Muḥammad. 'Utbah called Muḥammad to the Ka'bah and there stated his proposals: 'O son of my brother, you know your place among us Qurayshīs. Your ancestors are high in our pedigree, and your clan is foremost and strong. You have shocked and disturbed your people. You have broken their unity; you have ridiculed their wisdom; you have insulted their gods; you have degraded their religion; and you have even denied piety and pure faith to their ancestors.'

Muhammad then said, 'I am listening.'

'Utbah continued, saying, 'If you want wealth, we will all contribute to make you the richest of us all. If your object is honour and power, we will make you our leader and promise to decide nothing without you. If, even, you think of royalty, we will elect you our king. If that which you experience and see' — meaning the revelation and the visitation of Gabriel — 'is beyond your control and you cannot defend yourself

19. Stanley Lane-Poole, *The Speeches and Table-Talk of the Prophet Mohammad,* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1882), p. xxxiii.

against it, we shall help cure you by spending money for medical care. It is possible for a man to be overcome by the force of an unseen power until he finds a way to a cure.'

Muḥammad's answer was frustrating to the great representative of the Makkan leaders. He said, with respect, 'Abū al-Walīd, listen to me, please,' whereupon he began to recite from the Qur'ān the basic tenets of his new creed.[20]

The negotiation was broken; a compromise was impossible. Muḥammad wanted nothing less than a complete submission to the new faith. He himself was only a Messenger, and he had to carry out his orders from God and fulfill His mission faithfully.

The situation became more serious. The Makkan oligarchy resorted to violence against the growing humble element of the new congregation. They appealed to Muhammad's dignity and to his aristocratic blood, rebuking him for being the leader of the slaves and the unworthy in the city: 'You are followed only by the contemptible and degraded people who do not think.'[21]

But Muhammad was not sent to the aristocrats alone; he was a Messenger to all people. He was preaching what God ordered: 'O Mankind! Lo! We . . . have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another (and be friends). Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct.'[22]

The persecution of those who listened to the Apostle of God continued. At last the Makkan leaders appealed to Muḥammad's sense of tribal solidarity. They explained the danger to which the Quraysh and the city were exposed by the humiliation of their idols and the dissolution of Arab religious tradition. They said, 'If we were to follow the right path with you, we would be torn out of our land (and dispersed).'[23] They meant that they would be no different from the nomads of Arabia and would not be secure in their homes.

For Muḥammad that danger did not exist. God Who commanded him would provide for the defense of the faithful and the victory of those who abided by His Law. They should know and recognize the truth that the idols were helpless stones, and that there was no God but the Almighty Allah, the Creator of all, who had no partners. They

20. 'Azzām, *op. cit.* p. 16. He called 'Utbah by the name Abū al-Walīd, Father of Walīd, who was his son; this was a customary sign of respect.
21. al-Qur'ān, 11: 27. This was also said to Noah by his people.
22. Ibid., 49: 13.
23. Ibid.. 28: 57.

should recognize that there would be a resurrection and a day of judgement in which nothing would avail but devotion to God.

But they hated that menace of a judgement, and did not believe in a resurrection. A prominent leader, Umayyah ibn-Khalaf, took a decayed human bone from its grave and brought it to the Prophet, asking, 'You say that this will come to life again?'

'He Who has created it in the first instance can make it return,' the Prophet replied.

The arguments and disputes went on, accompanied by an intensive persecution of the Prophet's followers. Muḥammad then advised them to migrate to the opposite side of the Red Sea, to Christian Abyssinia (Ethiopia). They were received there by the Negus (emperor), whose protection they asked. According to tradition, they appealed to him in these words: 'O King, we lived in ignorance, idolatry and impurity; the strong oppressed the weak; we spoke untruths; we violated the duties of hospitality. Then a Prophet arose, one whom we knew from our youth, whose decent conduct, good faith, and morality is well known to all of us. He told us to worship one God, to speak the truth, to keep good faith, to assist our relations, to fulfill the duties of hospitality, and to abstain from all things impure and unrighteous; and he ordered us to offer prayers, to give alms, and to fast. We believed in him, and we followed him. But our countrymen persecuted us, tortured us, and tried to cause us to forsake our religion. And now we throw ourselves upon your protection. Will you not protect us?'

The Muslim refugees recited parts of the Qur'ān which praise Jesus and the Virgin Mary. It is said that the Negus and bishops thought their belief to be derived from the same sources as those of Christianity. Meanwhile, the Makkans did not remain idle. They sent emissaries with presents to the Abyssinians and petitioned them for the surrender of their escaped slaves and the other emigrants; but they were refused.

In Makka, the Prophet and a few of his converts, who through tribal customs and clan usages could protect themselves, remained as adamant and as devoted as ever in preaching the faith and in praying publicly at the Ka'bah against its gods.

The leaders of the Quraysh had already tried to negotiate with Muḥammad's kinsmen, the Banū-Hāshim, for the Prophet's death, offering payment of blood money in return, but the tribe had refused the offer. Finally, the Makkan oligarchy decided in desperation to take steps against Abū-Tālib. In their opinion, he was the real protector of the blasphemy, although still a revered upholder of Mak-

kan institutions and unconverted to Muḥammad's faith. They agreed to send him an ultimatum. When he received their warning, the old man was disturbed. He called in his nephew and told him that he had been warned by his tribe. 'I am afraid that the masses of Arabs will rally against me. Save yourself and me, and burden me not beyond the possible.'

Muḥammad wept, and answered, 'May God be my witness, if they were to place the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left, I would not renounce my Message but would rather perish instead.' Then he departed, but his uncle called him back and said, 'Go, my son. Say what you believe; I shall never, under any circumstance, let you down.'

This stand taken by the uncle, who was never converted to the new faith and who remained a leader in Makka with its pagan traditions and codes of honour, constitutes a remarkable episode in history. Abū-Ṭālib, though strictly a traditionalist and unwilling to part with his ancestors' religion, had found it just as important or even more important not to surrender to growing pressures or persecute his protégé, of whose sincerity and righteousness he had no doubt.

The Makkan leaders were perplexed. Abū-Ṭālib's refusal to act meant war. The Arabs were used to feuds and wars, but they could not accept this challenge, for it would have involved fratricidal slaughter in which Muhammad's followers would be negligible. The staunch traditionalists like themselves, including a majority of the Hāshimites, Muṭṭalibites, and others, would fight for the Prophet's cause for family reasons while sharing the Makkans' religion; and those who shared his faith (Abū-Bakr, 'Uthmān, Ṭalḥah, 'Umar, and others) would be on the other side against their kinsmen. The leaders backed down, waiting for Muḥammad to realize the dangerous situation toward which he was leading his clan, its supporters and those who believed in him.

Muḥammad was not to seek any conciliation. He was in the hands of God. He was sure that another, higher will was directing his destiny, and that the only way out was for the Quraysh to see, despite all its pride and vested interests, that its shame lay in worshipping useless idols that could not direct men to piety and righteousness in this world or save them in the next on the great day of judgement. He was sent through the mercy of God to make the Arabs a worthy people dedicated to the cause of serving mankind and their Creator.

The Quraysh and its mass supporters heaped ridicule and contempt upon the Prophet and his mission, and threw dirt on him wherever he went, but to no avail. He still preached publicly, and went to the

Ka'bah to pray in his own way. Ultimately, they decided to take extreme measures against his family, the Hāshimites: they refused to have any contact with them, to marry with them, or even to trade with them. They pledged themselves to that end in a proclamation which they placed in the sacred Ka'bah.

Abū-Ṭālib wisely and quietly took stock of the situation, and decided to withdraw to a valley on the eastern outskirts of Makka, where he and the loyal Hāshimites entrenched themselves. He wanted to avoid bloodshed, and all Hāshimite supporters, except Abū-Lahab, felt the same way. The Muṭṭalib clan, cousins of the Hāshimites, followed suit, and also entrenched themselves in the *shi'b* (a short, closed valley). Deprived of everything for more than two years, the Hāshimites and their supporters endured extreme hardships. Food was scarce; there was not enough to meet their needs. Some of the merciful people of the city would now and then smuggle a camel-load of food and supplies to them.

Hardly any new converts were made during this period. Most of those converts who remained outside the *shi'b* took refuge in Abyssinia. Nevertheless, the Prophet's determination and courage never weakened. He continued to go to the Ka'bah and to pray publicly. He used every opportunity to preach to outsiders who visited Makka for business or on pilgrimage during the sacred months. He never doubted God's ultimate victory.

In the third year of boycott and siege, many Quraysh leaders began to feel guilty about isolating their kinsmen to perish in the *shi'b*. After all, the majority of those boycotted and besieged were not even converts; they were idol worshippers, like themselves, but they were going through these trials just the same, in keeping with their code of honour, for the protection of a kinsman who had always been a truthful and honest person.

The moderates found an excuse in that the proclamation suspended in the Ka'bah under the watchful eyes of the idol gods was eaten by worms. The merciful party thus took courage; their leaders put on their arms and went to the *shi'b*, where the exiles had been suffering, and extricated them.

And so, in the eighth year of the Prophet's mission, the converts, his uncle Abū Ṭālib, and the clan that had honoured its tribal tradition in giving protection to a faithful son went back to their homes.

That was not the end of the bad times and suffering. Muḥammad soon lost his uncle, the veteran Sheik of Banū-Hāshim. Abū Ṭālib was

soon followed by the faithful Khadījah, the first convert of the Prophet, his beloved wife, adviser and comforter. Hearing of the respite from siege and boycott, many of the emigrants to Abyssinia came back, but they soon met an intensified persecution and were subjected to endless suffering.

To preach in Makka seemed hopeless, and to provoke the Qurayshīs was not the best of wisdom. The Prophet then turned his hopes away from his tribe and city to other cities and tribes. The nearest and strongest competitor of Makka was the city of al-Tā'if, fifty miles southeast of Makka. With his servant Zayd the Prophet walked up the rugged mountains to that city. He visited the tribal leaders, and quietly asked their help. He was refused and badly treated. Dismissed, and followed by vagabonds and street urchins who drove him on and would not allow him to rest, he became exhausted. His feet bleeding, he sat and appealed to the Almighty for His mercy. The prayer that ensued has become one of the cherished legacies of the faithful appealing to God in desperate circumstances.

He gathered strength and continued on his way back to Makka, reaching it three days later. Zayd was concerned, and asked the Prophet whether he did not fear thrusting himself into the hands of the Qurayshīs, who continued to plot against the powerless in the city. 'God will protect His religion and His Prophet,' was the reply. The Makkans had learned of the Prophet's reverses at al-Ṭā'if and were preparing a degrading reception for him. None of the Makkan chieftains from whom Muḥammad requested protection for safe entry into the city would extend him help; but a good-hearted pagan chief, al-Muṭ'im ibn-'Adī, took him under his protection and brought him home. Thus did Muḥammad re-enter Makka — guarded by a polytheist, scoffed at by his fellow citizens, and pitied for his lot by his helpless followers.

In that sad year of recurring calamities and gloom, when tragedy seemed about to engulf Muḥammad's mission, a gleam of hope came to sustain him. During the pilgrimage season and the sacred months, when the traditional laws forbade violence, the Prophet had by happy chance converted a few people from Yathrib, who swore allegiance to him. They returned to 'Aqabah in the spring of A.C. 621 with the good news that his faith was being accepted by many in Yathrib. They were accompanied by twelve representatives of the two principal tribes, Aws and Khazraj, who in Muslim history later became known as *Anṣār* (helpers). The Yathribite delegation told the Prophet that their people

were willing to accept Islam and pledged, 'We will not worship save one God; we will not steal nor commit adultery nor kill our children; we will in no wise slander, nor will we disobey the Prophet in anything that is right.' This pledge was later called the first *Bay'at al-'Aqabah* (Pledge of Al-'Aqabah). The second came a year later, following the pilgrims' season, when seventy of the Yathribites came again to 'Aqabah, and secretly pledged themselves and their people to defend the Prophet as they would defend their own wives and children.

Makka was no longer a safe place for the Muslims to reside in. The Prophet then directed those who had returned from Abyssinia and other converts to emigrate and head for Yathrib. Quietly they started to move out. In a few months, more than a hundred families left their homes and migrated to Yathrib. The Qurayshīs were on their guard. The migration of the Prophet to a rival city was harmful to them and they were determined to prevent it at all costs. They decided to kill him, but collectively — representatives of all clans would plunge their swords into him — so that the Hashimites, faced with this joint responsibility, would be prevented from taking vengeance on a single clan.

The Trusted Abū-Bakr and 'Alī stayed behind in Makka with the Prophet. 'Alī sought to deceive the spies of the oligarchy by occupying the Prophet's bed, while the Prophet and Abū-Bakr went to hide out in a neglected cave a few miles south of Makka, on Mount Thawr. When the Makkans discovered that the Prophet had eluded them, they immediately instigated a search, but they failed to catch him, and after concealing himself in the cave for three days, Muhammad rode off to Yathrib.[24] With his arrival, a new era dawned. Conscious of this fact, the Muslims dated their new era from this year of the migration commonly called the Hijrah (or Hegira). It began on June 16, A.C. 622.[25]

When the Prophet entered Yathrib in the summer of that year, many leading *Anṣār* and a few hundred others were already converted. There were also the *Muhājirūn* (the Makkan Muslim emigrants), who greeted him on the outskirts of the city. The pagans and Jews gave him a good reception as well, each for a different reason. The Arab Jews were monotheists — they constituted three tribes, living as neighbours of the Arab pagan tribes who had originally come from the Yemen and

24. This city was later called *Madīnat al-Rasūl* (the City of the Prophet), or simply *al-Madīnah* (the City); it is modern Medīna.
25. *Hijrah* means literally emigration. The Muslim calendar dates from the Hijrah; that is A.C. 622 is 1 Anno Hegirae (A.H.).

had gradually gained supremacy in Yathrib. The Jews hoped that Muḥammad, as a monotheist, might become their ally against the pagan Arabs and even against the Christians in northern Arabia. As for the pagans, their reason for receiving Muḥammad was not religion but rather the competition between Makka and Yathrib. Furthermore, the Prophet was related to them on his maternal side — his great-grandmother was a member of Khazraj, the most important tribe in Yathrib — and 'the enemy of my enemy' was as good a reason as any!

Members of each group tried to direct Muḥammad's camel toward their quarters so that he would become their guest. He asked them to let the animal go freely and stop where it would be best for everybody. Where it stopped, he chose his abode. Today it is the famous shrine where the Prophet's tomb stands, and it is visited yearly by thousands of Muslim pilgrims.

On that spot he lived, directed the affairs of the new nation and built the first *masjid* or mosque of Islam; and on that spot he died.

After thirteen years of intensive struggle to survive, the Prophet had at last found a friendly city where he could defend himself and base his future operation.

The Qurayshīs in Makka were disturbed. They were powerful as owners of interests in all parts of Arabia, as guardians of polytheism and the idol gods of the tribes, and as leaders of the Arabian pilgrimage. Their city was a centre both of Arabian trade and of a banking system whose money-lenders granted usurious loans to the various tribes. Muḥammad, their rebellious kinsman, had now taken refuge in a rival town, and had created a rival base astride their important trade routes to Syria and the north. Moreover, many of their sons and daughters had migrated with him to the enemy camp. They knew that Muḥammad would never compromise in his religion, and that peace would be impossible with him.

Muḥammad, however, was not to seek refuge for safety. He was the Messenger of God in the world, and idol worship in his tribe and homeland must come to an end. His new nation would have to divorce itself from idolatry, usury, immorality, alcoholism and vain and sanguine pride in tribalism, and above all it would have to become muslim, that is, submissive to God, the almighty One, Who has no partners, and to Whom all will return to be judged for whatever they have been.

His first concern in Yathrib was to build his simple place of worship,

the *masjid,* where the faithful could also meet to discuss the affairs of their world. We must remember that Islam, unlike other great religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, subscribes to a political and social order which is to be carefully established and observed in the here and now as a road to the afterworld. The Kingdom of God in Heaven is achieved through piety and through a system of social and political order, namely, a Kingdom of God on earth.

The life of the Prophet in Makka had been primarily concerned with the fundamentals of his faith: the unity of God, resurrection, the day of judgement, worship and the purification of the soul. This concern continued in Yathrib, where the *ummah* — congregation or nation — could be organized as an independent entity. A constitution and a system of defense were needed. The new society had to engender a social order and a state. The Prophet, guided by revelation, was able to implement the political and social structure of the new *ummah,* despite exposure to a war of annihilation.

In meeting this challenge, the Prophet, with the guidance of God and his own personal aptitude, fused the Muslim congregation of various clans into a solid nation with one loyalty, Islam, and one brotherhood transcending tribal customs. The second task was an alliance with the neighbouring Jews and pagan Arabs for a common defense and for security and peace in Yathrib. This was accomplished through treaty. This was the famous Covenant of Yathrib, resembling in certain aspects that of the League of Nations or of the United Nations, which aimed at the maintenance of peace and security among the various tribes and the creation of a common system of security as a consequence of common responsibility.

The next problem was what kind of defense to erect, a mobile or static one. In nomadic Arabia, static defense was but the final resort in extreme necessity, as it meant isolation accompanied by hardships. More important, it would also mean a halt in the expansion of the new faith and in the growth of the new *ummah.* Muhammad was essentially the Prophet of God to mankind and the chosen instrument of the propagation of Islam, and whether in Makka or Yathrib, the faith was his fundamental objective; therefore, he decided against static defense.

In the second year of the Hijrah, the Prophet initiated mobile defense, which led in the third year to the famous Battle of Badr, located southwest of Yathrib. His forces were some three hundred infantry-

men and three cavalrymen, with no armour but swords and limited supplies. His enemy, Quraysh, had three times his infantry, a hundred cavalrymen and a large supply caravan. The Prophet's force nevertheless defeated them. The causes of the victory lay in their superior discipline and leadership and the high morale which resulted from their great faith in God and the promise of afterlife.

The Battle of Badr was a great victory, especially because it established the Muslim community as a separate political and social as well as religious entity and confirmed the power of the Prophet, but it was not decisive. Muḥammad treated his Quraysh prisoners in a chivalrous and humane way. His prestige in the eyes of the pagan bedouins[26] around Yathrib rose considerably. During the Battle of Badr, these nomads waited like poised vultures, ready to sweep down on the defeated and carry off the loot. As the Qurayshīs were well established in Arabia, they would have been afraid to exploit them in adversity; however, the Prophet's party still lacked roots firm enough to survive misfortune and the Arab nomad's greed for plunder. But God saved His followers, who never boasted of their victory — it was God's victory, they all agreed; even the angels were reinforcing them against the pagans.

The first Muslim army came back to Yathrib with Makkan prisoners who were mostly of the same tribe as the Prophet, who treated them with mercy and sent them home.

In the third year of the Hijrah, while the Prophet was as usual absorbed in his worship and in his preaching, he consolidated the position of his *ummah* and looked after the defense of his city. Neither were his enemies idle. One year later they were ready, and again marched on Yathrib with a force three times as large as the one defeated at Badr. The Prophet moved to engage them, and they met on the slopes of Mount Uhud. The fierce battle ended with the retreat of the Muslim forces and the wounding of the Prophet; but through his endurance and his resourceful and courageous leadership, he managed to save his small army. Abū Sufyān, who was leading the Makkans, called from the top of the hill, saying, 'Uḥud for Badr; we call it even. We will meet again next year.' Both forces retired to their original bases. But that was not the end; Uḥud, like Badr, was not decisive.

Two years later, Quraysh built up a much larger force, allied itself to many tribes, and was able to mobilize an army of ten thousand men. It

26. The English word comes from the Arabic *badawī* (singular: badū), meaning nomads, as distinguished from settled population.

was well armed and equipped, and thus far greater than any force that the Prophet could muster. The attackers laid siege on Yathrib, and for two weeks pressed to break through; but they failed. The Prophet had introduced new defense tactics — digging trenches and raising barricades, at which he himself laboured with the men day and night. The Prophet's faith in God and the great zeal of his followers, particularly the *Muhājirūn* and *Anṣār,* balanced the enemy's superiority in arms and numbers. A severe wind blew, accompanied by a dust storm. The morale of the *Ahzāb*[27] faltered with the evening; they argued among themselves, and ultimately broke camp and retired. The Muslims followed them a certain distance. That was the last Quraysh attempt to destroy its enemy's base in Yathrib.

A year later, that is, in the sixth year of the Hijrah, the Prophet moved in force toward his home city, Makka. He wanted to make his lesser pilgrimage (*'umrah*) to the Ka'bah, which, although it housed pagan idols, was still regarded by Muslims as sacred, because in the view of the Prophet the Ka'bah had been built by the Patriarch Abraham for the worship of God. It was in the vicinity of the Ka'bah, near the well of Zamzam, that Abraham had settled his Egyptian wife Hagar with her son Ishmael. The Qurayshīs and other northern Arab tribes were the descendants of Abraham through his son Ishmael. The Muslims therefore believed that they had the right to perform the pilgrimage initiated by their great father, Abraham, the first Arab to worship Allah, the only God.

But the Makkans disagreed with them, and sought to bar their entry. Finally, a ten-year truce[28] was concluded with Quraysh whereby the Prophet agreed, among other things, to postpone his pilgrimage to the following season.

The march on Makka and the truce that resulted therefrom constitute a turning point in Muslim history: for the first time, the right of every person to preach and practice his faith freely was recognized by a formal treaty. A year after the conclusion of the truce, the Prophet and two thousand men entered Makka, which, according to previous agreement, was evacuated temporarily of its inhabitants. The Muslims completed their pilgrimage in an admirable manner, and impressed the Makkans to such an extent that conversions to Islam in-

27. Literally, leagues, that is, a group banded in a general alliance against the Prophet and his men.

28. Known as the Truce of al-Ḥudaybiyah (a place near Makka). The date was A.D. 628.

creased by leaps and bounds. Delegations were sent by Arabian tribes from the four corners of the peninsula to pledge their loyalty to Muḥammad in Yathrib.

When two years later the Qurayshīs violated their treaty obligations and attacked the Khuzā'ah tribe, which was allied with the Muslims, the Prophet led a march on Makka on Wednesday, the tenth of Ramaḍān (in the eighth year of the Hijrah — A.D. 630), with ten thousand men. On that memorable day, the Prophet asked the Makkans, 'What do you think I will do to you?' They answered, 'You are a generous brother and the son of a generous brother.' 'Go,' the Prophet rejoined, 'you are freed.'

Lane-Poole writes:

. . . The day of Muḥammad's greatest triumph over his enemies was also the day of the grandest victory over himself. He freely forgave Quraysh all the years of sorrow and cruel scorn with which they had afflicted him, and gave an amnesty to the whole population of Mecca. Four criminals whom Justice condemned made up Muḥammad's proscription list, when as a conqueror he entered the city of his bitterest enemies. The army followed in his example, and entered quietly and peaceably; no house was robbed, no woman insulted. One thing alone suffered destruction. Going to the Ka'bah, Muḥammad stood before each of the three hundred and sixty idols, and pointed to them with his staff saying, 'Truth is come, and falsehood is fled away!' and at these words his attendants hewed them down and all the idols and household gods of Mecca and round about were destroyed.'[29]

After the conquest of Makka, Muḥammad had to march on another stubborn enemy, al-Ṭā'if, the important dwelling place of the much-exalted idol god Hubal. It was the city to which the Prophet had journeyed in his worst days of persecution, seeking refuge but receiving humiliation instead. Ten years had elapsed since then, and now he believed that the victory in Makka might persuade the inhabitants of al-Ṭā'if to sue for peace. On the contrary, they mobilized the great Hawāzin confederacy of tribes against him, and rallied the city people for a decisive day with the enemy of their god. The two forces met at Hunayn. The Muslims were then commanding the largest force in their history to date, but they were being routed and were retreating when the Prophet rallied the old *Anṣār* and *Muhājirūn* veterans. Fighting courageously, though Muḥammad was wounded, they won the day. The Prophet was so generous and forgiving to his old enemies and

29. Lane-Poole, *op. cit.* p. xlvii.

persecutors that some of his followers among the *Anṣār* objected. But the Prophet soothed them with wise and fair exhortations, and played upon their sympathies until they wept.

Upon returning to Yathrib, Muḥammad encountered delegations sent by tribes and settled peoples of Arabia. They came to pay homage to him and to profess the faith of Islam. Thus was Arabia won over to Islam.

But what about the rest of the world? Muḥammad always conceived of his mission as being directed to all people. Already he had sent his emissaries to Arabia's neighbouring emperors, the Persian and Roman (Byzantine), who ignored his Message or humiliated the messengers. The only courteous response was from the Coptic leader of Egypt.

In southern Syria (modern Jordan), certain of his emissaries were brutally murdered, which occasioned the battle at Mu'tah later.[30] For some years after their army's defeat at Mu'tah, the Muslims were in a state of war with the Byzantine emperor, Heraclius, who was said to be gathering together a large force in Syria to deal with the new Arab menace on his southern frontier and to liquidate the new Arab ruler who entertained such serious pretensions.

For this and other reasons, the Prophet decided to prepare a large army and march north. This was the last military expedition he was to plan. He had pointed out the direction. A short time after his death, his Companions marched north and four years later, they conquered both mighty empires, the East Roman and the Persian.

In the tenth year of the Hijrah, the Prophet made his last pilgrimage to Makka, and delivered his Farewell Speech at Minā to a congregation of forty thousand Muslims. He commenced, 'O people, listen to me; I may not ever meet you again here after this year.' Then, in a great sermon, he expressed his fears that they might lose the way of God and return to a lawless society and to tribal feuds. He ended a great law-giving speech by asking them if they thought that he had faithfully delivered his message. They answered with one voice, 'Yes!' He then said, 'God, You are my witness,' and descended from his camel.

The Muslims called that sermon the Farewell Speech and that pilgrimage the Farewell Pilgrimage. Since the Prophet's first call by the angel Gabriel twenty-three years earlier, revelation after revelation had continued. He had learned them by heart and inscribed them, and so had his friends. They formed together the glorious Book of Islam, the Qur'ān. At the end of this sermon, and as a final word, he recited in the

30. See pp. 159-160.

name of God this revelation: 'This day I (Allah) have perfected your religion for you and completed My favour unto you, and have chosen for you as religion AL-ISLAM.'[31]

His dear friends then wept. They felt that his end was near, that the Prophet had fulfilled his mission; and it was so.

The Prophet died of fever in Yathrib, which thereafter was called al-Madīnah. His life, suffering, and triumph will remain for Muslims and non-Muslims alike a symbol of modesty, faithful devotion, and dedicated service to God, a high example of manhood.

31. al-Qur'ān, 5: 3.

'ABD AL-RAHMĀN 'AZZĀM

Scholar and statesman, 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Azzām was the first Secretary-General of the Arab League (1945–1952). Published work: *The Eternal Message of Muhammad*, New York: Mentor Book, 1964.

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